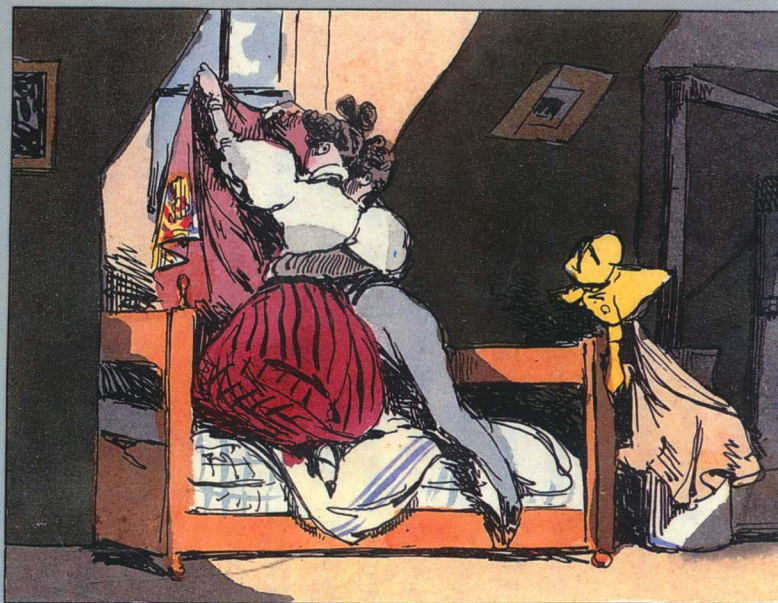


Modern Critical

INTERPRETATIONS

Edited and with an Introduction by HAROLD BLOOM

Stendhal's The Red and the Black



Modern Critical Interpretations

Stendhal's
The Red and the Black

Edited and with an introduction by

Harold Bloom

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Modern Critical Interpretations

Stendhal's

The Red and the Black

Modern Critical Interpretations

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Editor's Note

This book brings together a representative selection of the best modern critical interpretations of Stendhal's novel *The Red and the Black*. The critical essays are reprinted here in the chronological order of their original publication. I am grateful to Suzanne Roos for her assistance in editing this volume.

My introduction argues that Stendhal is the Thomas Hobbes of Romantic novelists, more a materialist metaphysician of eros than he is a moral psychologist. René Girard, himself a metaphysician of novelistic eros, begins the chronological sequence with his celebrated analysis of how Stendhal perceived the comedy of mimetic or triangular desire, but not, according to Girard, its later tragedy.

The formalist mandarin Harry Levin gives us a very different *Red and the Black*, an original social vision in which Julien's hypocrisy, like Hamlet's madness, serves as a dramatic device. Refreshingly, D. A. Miller illuminates Julien's attempt to murder Mme de Rênal as a rescue expedition "to save what she has meant to him—to put her back in her place at the dead center of red." Peter Brooks, like D. A. Miller a critic who knows how difficult it is to *use* Freud, shrewdly traces what is most problematic in Julien's relation to the paternal principle. Stendhal's placement of the burden of representation upon his readership is highlighted in Ann Jefferson's account of *The Red and the Black's* acute consciousness of the readers' share.

Margaret Mauldon, outlining the relation of *The Red and the Black* to the tradition of the epistolary novel, usefully concludes that Stendhal's great work is "a catalogue of miscommunications: of misleading roles assumed or imposed, of mistaken identities, of misunderstanding, misrepresentations and misreadings." In this book's final essay, Carol A. Mossman surveys the interlocking patterns of Julien's and Mathilde's separate "novels," until the two converge upon the final image of Julien's severed head.

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Introduction

Nietzsche saluted Stendhal as “this strange Epicurean and man of interrogation, the last great psychologist of France.” Yet Stendhal is both less and more than a psychologist, even in the sense of moral psychologist intended by Nietzsche. If we are unhappy because we are vain, which seems true enough, then the insight seems related to the conviction that our sorrows come to us because we are restless, and cannot sit at our desks. To assimilate Stendhal to Pascal would be tasteless, yet to determine the pragmatic difference between them is a complex labor. Pascal, to me, is the authentic nihilist; Stendhal is something else. Call that Julien Sorel, who attracts us without compelling our liking. Or do we like him? Robert M. Adams coolly concludes that:

Whether you like Julien Sorel, and for what parts of his behavior, depends, then, in some measure, on who you think you are and what conspiracies or complicities your imagination allows you to join, in the course of reading the book.

That may be giving Stendhal the best of it, since the reader’s fundamental right, as critic, is to ask the writer “who do you think you are, anyway?” The reversal is shrewd, whether Stendhal’s or Adams’s, since we do not expect the author to be quite as aggressive as ourselves. Stendhal brazenly excels us, and Julien is more his surrogate than many have allowed. We admire Julien for the range of his imagination, and are a little estranged by his extraordinary (if intermittent) ability to switch his affections by acts of will. He is, of course, designedly a little Napoleon, and if one is not Hazlitt or Stendhal that may not move one to affection. But the Napoleonic is only one wave or movement in him, and Stendhal is one of that myriad of nineteenth-century writers of genius who fracture the self. A more crucial movement is the Byronic, and here Adams is very perceptive indeed, marvelously so:

Most of what we think about Julien depends, of course, on our judgment of his behavior with the two ladies; and here we come up against the central paradox of the novel, that (like the ladies) we don't really think more highly of our hero the better he behaves. Quite the contrary. The worse he behaves, the more painful the sacrifices he requires of them, the more we are impressed by their determination to love him. Impervious to jealousy, untouched by his effort to murder her, Mme. de Rênal defies public scandal, leaves her husband and children, and comes to be with Julien in the hour of his anguish. Mathilde is in despair that he no longer loves her though she has sacrificed even more prodigally to her love of him. The revelation of Julien is not to be made directly, in the glare of open daylight, but only through the glow reflected on the faces of these devoted acolytes. As with Christ and Dionysus, the mystery of Julien is performed in the darkness of a prison-tomb, and his resurrection is celebrated in the presence of women. The cenacle of Julien allures its converts by withdrawing its mystery, etherealizing its cult: that is the work of the book's last important section.

One could argue that Julien, like Lord Byron, has that cool passivity which provokes his women into a return to themselves, so that his function is to spur these remarkable (and very dissimilar) ladies on to the epiphanies of their own modes of heroism. This could account for what I myself find most unsatisfactory about *The Red and the Black*, which is the obscurity (perhaps even obscuratism?) of Julien's final state of the soul:

The bad air of the prison cell was becoming insupportable to Julien. Fortunately on the day set for his execution a bright sun was shining upon the earth, and Julien was in the vein of courage. To walk in the open air was for him a delicious experience, as treading the solid ground is for a sailor who has been long at sea. There now, things are going very well, he told himself, I shall have no lack of courage.

Never had that head been so poetic as at the moment when it was about to fall. The sweetest moments he had ever known in the woods at Vergy came crowding back into his mind, and with immense vividness.

Everything proceeded simply, decently, and without the slightest affectation on his part.

Two days before he had told Fouqué:

—As for emotion, I can't quite answer; this dungeon is so ugly and damp it gives me feverish moments in which I don't recognize myself; but fear is another matter, I shall never be seen to grow pale.

He had made arrangements in advance that on the last day Fouqué should take away Mathilde and Mme. de Rênal.

—Put them in the same coach, he told him. Keep the post horses at a steady gallop. Either they will fall in one another's arms or they will fall into mortal hatred. In either case, the poor women will be somewhat distracted from their terrible grief.

Julien had forced from Mme. de Rênal an oath that she would live to look after Mathilde's son.

—Who knows? Perhaps we retain some consciousness after death, he said one day to Fouqué. I should like to rest, since rest is the word, in that little cave atop the big mountain that overlooks Verrières. I've told how several times when I spent the night in that cave and looked out over the richest provinces of France, my heart was afire with ambition: that was my passion in those days. . . . Well, that cave is precious to me, and nobody can deny that it's located in a spot that a philosopher's heart might envy. . . . You know these good congregationists in Besançon can coin money out of anything; go about it the right way, and they'll sell you my mortal remains. . . .

Julien's superb sense of humor, at the end, enchants us, but what precisely is Stendhal's final attitude towards his hero? I take this sentence as not being ironic: "Never had that head been so poetic as at the moment when it was about to fall." Julien is madly in love with Mme de Rênal; the sincerity of this madness cannot be doubted, but then the suicidal intensity or sustained drive beyond the pleasure principle of Julien's last days cannot be doubted either. Several critics have remarked upon the supposed similarity between Julien and Don Quixote, but I cannot see it. The Don lives in the order of play until he is battered out of it; then he dies. What others call madness is simply the Don's greatness. But Julien falls into pathology; it is an attractive craziness, because it makes him more likeable than before, yet it remains a kind of madness. Stendhal is poor at endings; the conclusion of *The Charterhouse of Parma* is also weak and abrupt. But I feel a certain hesitancy in myself at these judgments. Perhaps I simply like both novels so much that I resent Stendhal's own apparent loss of interest when he nears an end. The best defense of Julien's demise was made by Stendhal's subtle

disciple, the Prince of Lampedusa, author of *The Leopard*: “The author hastens to kill the character in order to be free of him. It is a dramatic and evocative conclusion unlike any other.” One wants to protest to the Prince that it isn’t dramatic enough, but he forestalls the complaint: “The impulsive, energetic handsome Julien spends his last words to tell his friend how he must go about buying back his body.” Evidently, this is dramatic in the mode of *The Leopard*, where death takes place in the soul, and the body alone remains living. A Stendhalian pathos, the Prince implies, belongs only to the happy few; it is a pathos more of sensibility than of emotion.

Mathilde and Julien, on the occasion of their first night together, are comic triumphs of sensibility over emotion. “Their transports,” Stendhal observes, “were a bit *conscious*,” which is a delicious understatement:

Mlle. de La Mole supposed she was fulfilling a duty to herself and to her lover. The poor boy, she thought to herself, he’s shown perfect bravery, he ought to be happy or else the fault lies in my want of character. But she would have been glad to ransom herself, at the cost of eternal misery, from the cruel necessity imposed upon her.

In spite of the frightful violence with which she repressed her feelings, she was in perfect command of her speech.

No regret, no reproach came from her lips to spoil this night, which seemed strange to Julien, rather than happy. What a difference, good God! from his last stay of twenty-four hours at Verrières! These fancy Paris fashions have found a way to spoil everything, even love, he said to himself, in an excess of injustice.

He was indulging in these reflections as he stood in one of the great mahogany wardrobes into which he had slipped at the first sounds coming from the next room, which was that of Mme. de La Mole. Mathilde went off with her mother to mass; the maids quickly left the room, and Julien easily escaped before they came back to finish their tasks.

He took a horse and sought out the loneliest parts of the forest of Meudon near Paris. He was far more surprised than happy. The happiness that came from time to time like a gleam of light in his soul was like that of a young second lieutenant who after some astounding action has just been promoted full colonel by the commanding general; he felt himself raised to an immense height. Everything that had been far above him yesterday was now at his level or even beneath him. Gradually Julien’s happiness increased as it became more remote.

If there was nothing tender in his soul, the reason, however strange it may seem, was that Mathilde in all her dealings with him had been doing nothing but her duty. There was nothing unexpected for her in all the events of the night, except the misery and shame she had discovered instead of those divine raptures that novels talk about.

Was I mistaken, don't I love him at all? she asked herself.

This hilarity of mutual coldness is the prelude to the novel's most delightful pages, as Stendhal surpasses himself in depicting the agon that springs up between these two titanic vanities. What Hobbes was to the principles of civil society, Stendhal was to the principles of eros. Neither man should be called a cynic. Each is more than a psychologist, because both saw the truth of the state of nature. Hobbes is to Stendhal what Schopenhauer was to the Tolstoy of *Anna Karenina*, the philosopher who confirms the insights so central to the novelist that they scarcely require confirmation. I would prefer to put it more starkly; if you repeatedly read *The Red and the Black*, then *Leviathan* becomes a fascinating redundancy, just as a deep knowledge of *Anna Karenina* renders *The World as Will and Representation* almost superfluous. Stendhal, and Tolstoy, are in their antithetical ways the true philosophers of love between the sexes, the dark metaphysicians of the unconscious verities of desire.

The Red and the Black: Deceit and Desire

René Girard

According to literary historians Stendhal inherited most of his ideas from the *philosophes* or the *idéologues*.

If this were true, this novelist whom we consider so great would not have a thought of his own; for his whole life he would remain faithful to the thought of others. It is a hard legend to kill. It is popular both with those who would deny intelligence in the novel and with those who are trying to find a complete Stendhalian system and think they have found it in his early writing, that is, in the only more or less didactic texts ever written by Stendhal.

Their thoughts dwell longingly on a huge key which would open all the gates of his work. A whole trousseau can be gathered effortlessly from the childish *Letters to Pauline*, from the *Journal*, and from his *New Philosophy*. There is a loud rattle in the lock but the gates remain closed. No page of *The Red and the Black* will ever be explained by means of Cabanis or Destutt de Tracy. Except for occasional borrowings from the system of temperaments there is no trace of the theories of his youth in the novels of his maturity. Stendhal is one of the few thinkers of his time who won his independence from the giants of the preceding epoch. For this reason he can render homage as an equal to the gods of his youth. Most of his romantic contemporaries are incapable of doing as much; they look on the rationalist Pantheon with great condescension, but should it enter their head to reason we find ourselves back in the century of the Enlightenment. Their opinions

From *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, translated by Yvonne Freccero. © 1965 by the Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore/London.

are different and even antithetical but the intellectual frameworks have not changed.

Stendhal does not give up thinking the day he stops copying the thought of others; he begins to think for himself. If the writer had never changed his opinion on the great political and social problems, why did he declare, at the beginning of the *Life of Henry Brulard*, that he had at last decided on his point of view regarding the nobility? Nothing in the Stendhalian vision is more important than the nobility, yet this definitive point of view is never systematically set down. The real Stendhal had an aversion to didacticism. His original thought is the novel and only the novel, for the moment Stendhal escapes from his characters the ghost of the Other begins to haunt him again. Therefore everything has to be gathered from his novels. The nonnovelistic texts sometimes contribute details but they should be handled with care.

Far from blindly trusting the past, Stendhal, even as early as *De L'amour*, considers the problem of the *error* in Montesquieu and other great minds of the eighteenth century. The alleged disciple wonders why such keen observers as the *philosophes* should have been so completely wrong in their visions of the future. At the end of *Memoirs of a Tourist* the theme of philosophical error is resumed and studied further. Stendhal finds nothing in Montesquieu to justify the condemnation of Louis-Philippe. The bourgeois king gave the French greater liberty and prosperity than ever before. The progress is real but it does not accord the people who benefit from it the increase of happiness foreseen by the theoreticians.

Stendhal's own duty is indicated to him by the mistakes of the *philosophes*. He must amend the conclusions of abstract intelligence by contact with experience. The intact Bastilles limited the vision of prerevolutionary thinkers. The Bastilles have fallen and the world is changing at a dizzying pace. Stendhal finds he is straddling several universes. He is observing the constitutional monarchy but he has not forgotten the *ancien régime*; he has visited England; and he keeps up with the constant stream of books dealing with the United States.

All the nations Stendhal is concerned with have embarked on the same adventure but they are moving at different speeds. The novelist is living in a veritable laboratory of historical and sociological observation. His novels are, in a sense, merely this same laboratory carried to the second degree. In them Stendhal brings together various elements which would remain isolated from each other even in the modern world. He confronts the provinces and Paris, aristocrats and bourgeois, France and Italy, and even the present and the past. Various experiments are carried out and they

all have the same aim—they are all meant to answer the same fundamental question: “Why are men not happy in the modern world?”

This question is not original. Everybody, or almost everybody, was asking it in Stendhal’s day. But few ask it sincerely, without having already decided a priori that one more or one less revolution is required. In his nonnovelistic writings Stendhal often seems to request both at the same time. But these secondary texts should not be allowed to worry us too much. Stendhal’s real answer is blended into his novels, scattered through them; it is diffuse, full of hesitations and modifications. Stendhal is as prudent in the novels as he can be assertive, when he is expressing his own “personal” opinion in the face of the opinion of others.

Why are men not happy in the modern world? Stendhal’s answer cannot be expressed in the language of political parties or of the various “social sciences.” It is nonsense to both bourgeois common sense and romantic “idealism.” We are not happy, says Stendhal, because we are *vaniteux*.

Morality and psychology are not the only sources of this answer. Stendhalian vanity has a historical component which is essential and which we must now clarify. In order to do this, we must first set forth Stendhal’s idea of nobility, which, he tells us in the *Life of Henry Brulard*, took a solid form rather late in his development.

In Stendhal’s eyes, nobility belongs to the man whose desires come from within himself and who exerts every ounce of his energy to satisfy them. Nobility, in the spiritual sense of the term, is therefore exactly synonymous with passion. The noble being rises above others by the strength of his desire. There must originally be nobility in the spiritual sense for there to be nobility in the social sense. At a certain point in history both senses of the word “noble” coincided, at least theoretically. This coincidence is illustrated in *The Italian Chronicles*. In fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italy the greatest passions were born and developed in the elite of society.

This relative accord between the social organization and natural hierarchy of men cannot last. The nobleman’s becoming aware of it is, in a sense, sufficient to precipitate its dissolution. A comparison is necessary to discover that one is superior to others: comparison means bringing closer together, putting on the same level, and, to a certain extent, treating the things compared in the same way. The equality of man cannot be denied unless it is first posited, however briefly. The oscillation between pride and shame which defines metaphysical desire can already be found in this first comparison. The nobleman who makes the comparison becomes a little more noble in the social sense but a little less noble in the spiritual sense. He begins the reflection that will gradually cut him off from his own nobility